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## The Professionalization of a University Writing Center Staff through a Professional Writing Internship Program

[Spring 2010 / Focus](#)

by **Kevin Dvorak**, *St. Thomas University*

### Professional writing internships



Kevin Dvorak

The University Writing Center (UWC) at **St. Thomas University** (STU) is closely connected with the university's English: Professional Writing program, as many of the UWC's tutors either major or minor in the program. One of the program's goals is to provide students with opportunities for growth and professional development in fields related to writing, and one way the program achieves this goal is through a professional writing internship. Many of the Professional Writing students have opted to use their internship to work at the UWC. These interns have shown how a writing center can be a site where tutors grow in many professional directions and where tutors can see first-hand returns from the amount of time and effort they invest into their positions. The goal of this article, then, is to briefly describe the STU Professional Writing internship program and show how it provides our UWC tutors with a variety of professional development opportunities inside and outside of our center.

### The Internship

The STU professional writing internship provides students with opportunities to gain real-world, professional writing-based work experience, whether it be working at the UWC, acting as a research assistant for a psychology professor, reporting for a local newspaper, or writing for a government agency. The internship possibilities are endless, as long as students are gaining experience with writing. Students are allowed to take the internship for a total of nine

credits. For each credit earned, an intern is required to work 50 hours during the course of a semester at his or her internship site. Therefore, a one-credit internship requires 50 work hours over 15 weeks; a three-credit internship requires 150 hours, equal to 10 per week. Therefore, a graduate can possibly enter the job market with over 450 hours of work/writing experience in her field.

**Our Professional Writing Internship program grew dynamically during its first full year, and it assisted in the growth and development of the UWC and its staff.**

The internship was first made available to students in fall 2008, the Professional Writing major's inaugural semester. Since the new major had not yet produced a series of upperclassmen who had entered their core curriculum, we did not expect to enroll many, if any, students as interns at that time. However, two Professional Writing Majors enrolled in the internship program, and both opted to work at the UWC. One of these students, Alexis, had already been a UWC tutor the year before; the second, George, was new to our center.

Now that the UWC had a set of interns, there needed to be a distinction between the types of positions at the UWC: tutor and intern. The primary duty of each position would be to support the UWC's mission by working one-to-one and in small groups with students to develop the latter's writing skills. However, since a goal of the internship program was to provide interns with opportunities to develop professional identities, I determined that UWC interns would have to focus more attention on becoming well-rounded writing center practitioners. Therefore, they would spend more time practicing three professional attributes of successful writing program administrators: teaching, scholarship, and leadership (Bruce).

**Initial Growth**

During the first fall semester, in addition to regular tutoring, one of the first two interns, Alexis, was given an assignment equivalent to a writing fellows position. She assisted our developmental writing program by attending their classes and working alongside students both during class and in the UWC. The developmental writing students were required to visit the UWC eight times during the course of the semester, so she also tracked the students' UWC attendance and met regularly with them about their progress. Thus, she became an important liaison between the UWC and developmental writing program. The second tutor, George, who was new to the UWC, was given the opportunity to develop his professional writing abilities by creating several new PowerPoint presentations, two of which were to be used in UWC-based APA and MLA workshops. In addition to these duties, the tutors read various writing center-related articles and conferenced with me regularly about their praxis-related issues and development.

**The next step was to create professional titles for each, one based on their individual interests, strengths, and professional goals. This would allow the interns to further develop their professional identities and allow them to better define the work they do.**

By the next semester, spring 2009, there were five three-credit and two one-credit Professional Writing Interns working at the UWC. The opportunities for

professional development grew even more, as two interns, Aileen and Karen, collaborated on a semester-long research project that culminated in a proposal to redesign the UWC's website, which was implemented during the following summer. Another intern, Denise, wrote a well-researched proposal to create a satellite writing center at a local public high school that, as a whole, had produced low SAT verbal and writing scores. Denise presented her project at the 2009 Florida Regional Writing Center Conference at the University of South Florida (USF). Though the proposal did not lead to a satellite center at the specific school it had proposed, it did lead to a satellite center being created at the high school across the street from our institution.

Our Professional Writing Internship program grew dynamically during its first full year, and it assisted in the growth and development of the UWC and its staff. The interns conducted numerous research projects; wrote several proposals, two of which led to immediate actions; presented at local conferences; and, most importantly, developed identities as professional writers and leaders on campus. The accomplishments of this first-year intern group set a high standard for those to follow, but, as Director of the UWC, I still felt we could do more to further enhance our professional atmosphere.

### **Professional Titles, Additional Responsibilities**

This fall, there are six interns working at the UWC, five for three credits and one for two credits. Four of these UWC interns are returning tutors and two are new to the UWC. Since many of them had already had UWC experience, it was quite easy to provide them with professional goals for the semester. The next step was to create professional titles for each, one based on their individual interests, strengths, and professional goals. This would allow the interns to further develop their professional identities and allow them to better define the work they do.

The first intern, Aileen, a junior, is in her fourth semester working at the UWC and has assumed the role of Research Assistant. Aileen and I were recently awarded an International Writing Centers Association Research Grant to investigate discursive interactions between Spanish- and English-speaking bilingual tutors and students, particularly when Spanish is used to explain English. This has been a topic of interest at our center since we opened in the fall of 2007, and Aileen did some research on the topic last spring for her Multigenre Research and Writing (a core course taught by me) course project. As a Research Assistant, Aileen will be gaining valuable professional experience as a scholar, gathering and maintaining a large data collection, which will include interviews with and surveys of bilingual students who work regularly with UWC tutors. Aileen's next career goal is to attend graduate school, so this experience is preparing her for the rigors of graduation education.

The next intern, Karen, a junior, has perhaps been the UWC's most organized person for the last four semesters. This trait earned her the title of Office Manager, a responsibility that includes providing leadership to the staff and watching over the UWC's day-to-day operations. Karen, a future law student, is in charge of making sure all Report for Faculty Forms, Session Forms, and emails have been appropriately filled out and filed. She is also in charge of spearheading a new project that will transfer all of the UWC's paper-based data from 2007-2009 to electronic files. She will have two UWC staff members working with her on this project, which, according to our estimates, will take six months to complete.

Our third intern is Aryanne, a new member of the UWC staff, was quickly given the title of Public Relations Specialist based on her strong artistic skills and fondness for using a variety of electronic media. In her first full week, Aryanne, a junior, designed business cards for our staff members, which has increased our staff's overall sense of professionalism, and has redesigned the UWC's bookmarks and brochure, which are two of our most popular advertising venues. Aryanne has also taken on the task of developing a brochure for the Southeastern Writing Center Association and will be creating advertising materials for this year's SWCA Florida Statewide Conference.

The title of Web Writer has been given to George, a senior who is enrolled as an intern for the third time. George, who was responsible for creating our APA and MLA PowerPoints and accompanying workshops, has a knack for technical writing and has already amassed a great deal of work experience in law offices and on websites. Therefore, he is now responsible for leading an effort to grow the UWC's website that Karen and Aileen initiated last spring and implemented this past summer. George and I outlined the UWC's potential web growth, and he is now charged with creating around 15-20 new pages of material focused on various factions of professional and technical writing.

Finally, Denise and Leo, both seniors, have partnered together this semester to coordinate a satellite writing center at a private, Catholic high school next to our University. Denise initiated this project as an intern last spring, and though she is not enrolled as an intern this fall, she is still working with us as a tutor. Leo, who worked last spring as a tutor, is now an intern. As Satellite Center Coordinators, they visit the high school on Tuesday afternoons after school and conference with students, and, on Friday mornings, they work in classroom settings with the school's primary composition instructor. As this satellite center program develops, Denise and Leo hope to begin a writing center education/training program that will teach the high school students how to tutor their peers, thus creating a more sustainable high school writing center environment. They are also planning on using this experience as the foundation for scholarship they will present at next year's SWCA Florida Statewide Conference. Thus, they are gaining valuable experience as teachers, scholars, and leaders.

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All of these interns now have more developed and defined leadership roles, but that has not left them working on their own in their specialized areas. They routinely seek input from one another and support each other's projects. The non-intern tutors also collaborate with the interns and provide support for the latter's projects. This work environment has even encouraged one of the non-interns, Lucas, to take on a professional title/identity: Athletic Department Liaison. Lucas is a soccer player, and this position has given him greater responsibility as a tutor who works closely with our athletes, promoting our services throughout the athletic department, locker rooms, and playing fields.

The STU Professional Writing Internship program has helped professionalize our University Writing Center. Enrolling in the internship program allows tutors to focus on developing three attributes of a writing center professional—teaching, scholarship, and leadership—which encourages them to invest more time and energy into their positions, take on leadership roles, develop strong professional identities, and maintain their sense of professionalism even after

they have completed their internships. It has even encouraged non-intern staff members to become more professionally active in our work environment. In all, it provides our entire staff with opportunities to work in a professionalized environment conducive to helping them and the students they work with succeed.

### Work Cited

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Kevin Dvorak is an Assistant Professor of English and Director of the University Writing Center at **St. Thomas University** in Miami Gardens. He is the co-editor, with Shanti Bruce, of ***Creative Approaches to Writing Center Work***, winner of the 2008 **IWCA** Outstanding Scholarship Award. He is also the President of the **Southeastern Writing Center Association**.

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